

Female Protagonist as an Existential Outsiders in Anita Desai's Novel

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the fictional world of Anita Desai, a great Indian women writer. It tries its best to show her clear outlook and standpoint on the issues of freedom and empowerment of her female characters. Her novel revolves around the psychological plight, like- their problem, feelings, fantasies, resentment and their alienation. The paper also shows how authentically the writer represents the deplorable condition of women in Indian patriarchal society.

Key words: Feminism, resentment, alienation, hyper-sensitive, insensitive, silent cry, yield, miserable

Anita Desai is a great novelist. Her works are associated with the reality of her time. The socio-cultural, political milieu finds artistic interventions in her text. Desai's female protagonists have little power in the family and remain marginal. Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul, Sarla, Uma, etc. are all best examples. They don't have respectable identity in the male dominated society. They are forced to live according to the traditional roles ascribed to them. Her women characters are hyper-sensitive and individualistic. They do not voice their protest against unpleasant surroundings and insensitive people. They let out a silent cry and suffer intensely. They refuse to yield and compromise and prefer death and miserable life. The settings of her novels are entirely in India.

Anita Desai is an Anglo Indian writer. She is recognized as one of the major voices in Indian writing in English. Desai was born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Her father Dhiren Mazumdar was a Bengali and her mother, was a German Lady. She grew up in Delhi and received her education at first at Queen Mary's School and then at Miranda House. Her father Dhiren Mazumdar was a Bengali and her mother, was a German Lady. Desai had the advantage of mixed parentage. She grew up knowing four languages, German, Bengali, Hindi and English. She says,

“We spoke German at home, it was the language in which I learned nursery rhymes and fairy tales. We spoke Hindi to all our friends and neighbors. I learned English when I went to School.”

As Anita Desai had a multilingual background, she could have chosen any one of the four languages, to write. She chose English Language, as she felt she would be able to express her feelings in a better way,

“My language (of the novels) is English, and I find it answers all my needs. It is rich and flexible, supple and adaptable, varied and vital. I think it is even capable of reflecting the Indian character and situation.”

She began to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. She completed her B.A English in Literature from the Miranda House of the University of Delhi in 1957. In the following year she married Ashvin Desai, a businessman.

Indian English Literature began as a by- product of the Indo- British encounter. The first Indian author writing in English was Dean Mohamed (1759- 1851). He published his memoirs; *The Travel of Dean Mohammad* in 1794. It consists of thirty eight letters. The book was written more than two centuries ago, when the British was taking over the country. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, wrote the first Indian Novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* which was published in 1864.

The increasing fondness of English among the people compelled many writers to write scholarly books. Some of the famous Indian diasporic writers are: NiradChoudhary, Ved Mehta, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, JhumpaLahiri, Salman Rushdie, Uma Parameswaran and V. S. Naipaul. Books written by these diasporic are well acclaimed and awarded. *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *A Wounded Civilization* (V. S Naipaul), *Jasmine* (Bharti Mukherjee), *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* (JhumpaLahiri), *Midnight Children* and *Shame* (Salman Rusdie), *Clear Light of the Day* and *Fasting Feasting* (Anita Desai).

As far as women writers of India are concerned, they have made visible contribution to World Literature. Their works are recognized for carrying originality and indigenous flavour of the soil. In the Indian literary scene they have done exceptionally well. But still it can be said about Anita Desai that her works carry very fine feminine sensibility which began to emerge after World War II.

Anita Desai emerged as a promising novelist on the Indian Literary horizon in 1963with the publication of her novel, *Cry, the peacock*. She has secured unique place due to her innovative theme and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. She has written eleven novels. Each novel has added new dimension to the Indian English Literature. She has been honored with prestigious awards for her creative writings. In 1978, she was awarded with Winfred Holtby Memorial Prize for *Fire On The Mountain*. She also got Sahitya Academy Award for the same novel. She was thrice shortlisted for Bookers Prize, once in 1980 for her novel *Clear Light of the Day*, in 1984 for her fiction *In Custody* and in 1999 for her fiction *Fasting Feasting*. In 2000, she

was awarded Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy). She was awarded Padma Bhushan in 2014(Wikipedia).

Feminist issues such as- identity crisis and freedom from the male dominated world are the main agenda in her novels. Her female characters are sensitive, intelligent and gifted women and they are married to dutiful and insensitive men. These unmatched marriages ultimately led to sinking in the bog of dull matrimonial relationship. Her women characters suffer in one way or the other at the hands of men or in the society. She exploits the situation of women suffering in her novels to present problems that confronts women in a male dominated society. Her novels deal with the upper middle class society.

Desai's, novels had added bright stars to her career. Anita Desai published her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. Here, she has made use of interior monologue and the stream of consciousness technique to portray the lonely life of Maya who is married to Gautama- a middle aged lawyer. Gautama wanted his wife to be submissive, patient, tolerant, traditional, compromising and demanding. In the initial year of her marriage, Maya tried to live her life as desired by her husband, but when she realized that her physical and emotional needs were not taken care of, she became an easy prey to solitude, silence and loneliness. Maya is pushed beyond endurance to insanity because of her husband inability to relate to her.

A voice in the City (1965) is the second novel of Anita Desai. Monisha, one of the characters of this novel is in many ways like Maya. She is not satisfied with her husband Jiban. Monisha has to suffer not only because of her husband's insensitivity but also because of her in-laws. Her's is a joint family household. Her psychological distance from her husband leaves her with emptiness and devoid of any kind of love. Many times she thought of ending her life as a mode of escape and ultimately, she sets herself ablaze. The common factor between the two women is that they are deprived of love and affection and they both are childless. Neither Maya nor Monisha find alternatives to their existence.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Desai deals with loneliness and depression felt by her novel character, Sita. She is trapped in unhappy marriage to Raman- a successful businessman. They are blessed with four children. She wants to avoid giving birth to her fifth child in this cruel world. The bond of love and affection between husband and wife, to lead a happy and successful marriage life was not present in their relationship. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility, while Raman believes in different values like, rationality, sanity and believed in norms and values of society. Raman cannot understand her problem. Peace eludes her. She started hating her husband's friends and acquaintances. She says,

“They are nothing- nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter, Animals.”

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) Nanda Kaul is the heroine of the novel. Here, Desai has dealt with the feminine sensibility. In the novel, Nanda Kaul and her husband Prof. Kaul do not have good relationship. Prof. Kaul had a long affair with a woman. Outwardly, they are considered as ideal couple by the University Community, but the reality is quite different. Their life is all barren. Her position is no better than a housekeeper. In order to forget the infidelity of her husband she retires to a haunted house 'Carignano' in Kasauli. Nanda gets psychologically disturbed when she gets the news of the arrival of her great granddaughter. Raka is coming to stay with her as her presence would break her cherished isolation. Raka is devoid of love and affection from her parents as they are always quarreling with each other. She is a victim of broken family. This made her life full of loneliness and devoid of emotions. As she was neglected by her parents, she shifted to Carignano. Things get complicated further when Nanda Kaul's friend, Ila Das- a welfare officer is raped and murdered. She finds it difficult to accept the news and finally succumbs to the shock. Nanda Kaul, who longed for calmness attain it in a very peculiar way.

In Custody (1984) focuses on the theme of marital discord and relationship problem. Deven Sharma and his wife Sharla are quite different in their temperaments. He is a Hindi lecturer in a college and Sharla has no interest in literature. She is ignorant and feels her husband frequent visits to Delhi as for meeting his girl friend. She is a picture of an abandoned wife. Deven Sharma, though teaches Hindi but is fond of Urdu. His friend, Murad asks him to take interview of an old Urdu poet Nur for a magazine that he edits. As the novel progress, this simple project becomes complicated as Deven takes the responsibility of writing the entire biography of Nur. While implementing this project, he faces a number of problems and almost loses his job and gets used to the poet and his sycophants. The experience of life makes him understand about human limitations. Finally, through a number of series of events he becomes the custodian of Nur and his poetry.

The novel *Fasting Feasting* (1999) of Anita Desai is divided into two parts. The first part deals with Uma's story, the plight of an isolated girl, whose life is full of frustration. The parents think that she is to be married to a boy with huge dowry and her education means to qualify as a desirable bride to a perspective groom. So the birth of a girl child is seen as compulsive expenditure in a family. This is the implication of 'Fasting'. Whereas on the birth of a son there is environment of rejoice and it is to be 'Feasted' upon. There is great rejoice at the birth of her brother Arun. The novel consists of three chief characters: Uma, Arun, Anamica. Uma is plain and she craves for education to be economically free but she is married to a man who is already married and is much older than her age. He had married her just for dowry. He has no feelings for her. She also undergoes humiliation by her in-laws. Her father brings her home, but she had no life either in her parental home where she is expected to serve her parents. The other character

Anamica is beautiful, clever and talented but all these qualities of her could not save her from meeting a tragic end. She was married in a joint family. She was beaten by her mother in – law and her husband use to be mute observer of her humiliation. Finally, she meets her gruesome death. Such events are not uncommon in Indian middle class household.

Lastly, we can say that all the novels of Anita Desai are superb in technical skill. Her novels explore the agonies of women trapped in the domestic walls of family life. Her protagonists are always women. Her novels focus on those areas which were previously ignored. This is the reason she is recognized as one of the major voices in Indian writing in English.

Summing up

Anita Desai explores patriarchal oppression of her women characters. They are too repressed to find their subjectivity. Desai seek to find out through her novels how women in Indian middle class society are bound by tradition and is a silent sufferer. The novels also raise questions on the thinking of Indian male who's intellectual and psychological dimensions are not much widened.

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